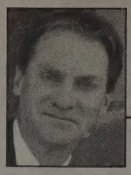


As The Village Turns

By Rich Tosches

The Phelps family spectacle

As you know, I'm not one to make fun of people or to blindly toss around insensitive jokes. For example, today is St. Patrick's Day and I would never tell a joke such as:

Q: What's the difference between an Irish funeral and an Irish wedding?

A: One less drunk.

So last week, when the Phelps family of Topeka, Kan., descended upon our village to give us their highly intelligent views on homosexuality, I searched my soul to make some sense of it all. I wondered why God put these people on earth.

And then God spoke to me. After making a joke about President Bush ("I kept it to Ten Commandments so people like him wouldn't have to take their shoes off to count them ..."), the Almighty One got serious and answered my question.

The Phelps family exists, God said, so that NASCAR and pro wrestling fans have someone to look down on.

And so last Friday they arrived, the children and grandchildren of the high priest of anti-gayness, Fred Phelps. Phelps himself, the pastor of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, was unable to be here due to a previous commitment that I believe involved sneaking out in the middle of the night and spray-painting "I Hate Queers" onto his own car.

"The apple doesn't fall far from the sociopath."

Right from the cradle

Fortunately, members of his family carried on without their highly esteemed intellectual leader and the anti-gay movement's most captivating speaker. (This Sunday's intelligent and thought-provoking sermon by the Rev. Phelps: "Can You Put One Of Them *Strait*jackets On a Homo?")

Appearing in front of Palmer High School holding signs that read "Thank God For AIDS" and "Fags Are Worthy of Death" — was Phelps' daughter, LeeAnn Phelps. She is one of 13 children produced by Fred and his wife, which tells you two very important things: 1) People who have a fervent belief often create many messengers to spread the word, and 2) the Trojan condom company should definitely look into making an easier-opening package.

Along with LeeAnn on this festive day of homosexual hating were four of her children. (This would make LeeAnn's sisters the children's "ignor-aunts.")

Anyway, all of LeeAnn's children look like movie stars — specifically, like the kid who sat on the bridge and played the banjo in "Deliverance."

Here now, some special words from LeeAnn Phelps: "We taught all of our children right from the cradle that homosexuals are worthy of death."

Her 9-year-old daughter smiled and held her "Thank God For AIDS" sign a little higher, a clear indication that — to use the old expression — "the apple doesn't fall far from the sociopath."

Beside the mother and daughter stood another product of this loving family, a teenage son who held a "God Hates Fags" sign throughout the 45-minute demonstration and wore a Kansas City Chiefs jacket. Despite being part of the demonstration, he is apparently just a typical teenage boy who loves football — cheering wildly after each touchdown by his team and, of course, crying and trying to gouge out his own eyes every time the quarterback moves in behind the center.

The Phelps family: three generations of hate.

© 2005 Bruce Elliott

Pointing and laughing

Her children were at the demonstration, LeeAnn said, because school was closed as the teachers held an in-house work session back in Topeka. Among the topics being addressed by the teachers was how to keep students motivated, how to stretch the education budget and whether $1,000 would be enough of a bribe to get any of the other students to sit at a lunchroom table with one of the Phelps kids.

The Phelps family drove to our village because of an ongoing controversy at Palmer High School. Administrators at the downtown public school have refused to recognize a gay-awareness club formed by students.

"People in Colorado Springs called us and told us what's going on at the school and they asked for our help," said LeeAnn, who refused to identify the people who allegedly made the calls.

During the demonstration some 600 Palmer students and other villagers stood across the street and conducted a counter-protest that basically consisted of pointing and laughing at the Phelps family.

Said one teenage boy, who held a cup of Starbuck's coffee in one hand, a sign reading "Go Home" in the other and who didn't want to give his name: "They're like the Beverly Hillbillies on crack."

And in the middle of it all, standing sentry and clogging up traffic as it has done for nearly a century, was the statue of our village's founder, Gen. William Jackson Palmer, sitting atop his majestic stallion, "Jimmy the Wonder Horse."

And as the stunning lack of respect for human beings swirled all around him, yesterday's village leader stared toward Pikes Peak and ignored it all.

Just like today's village leaders.

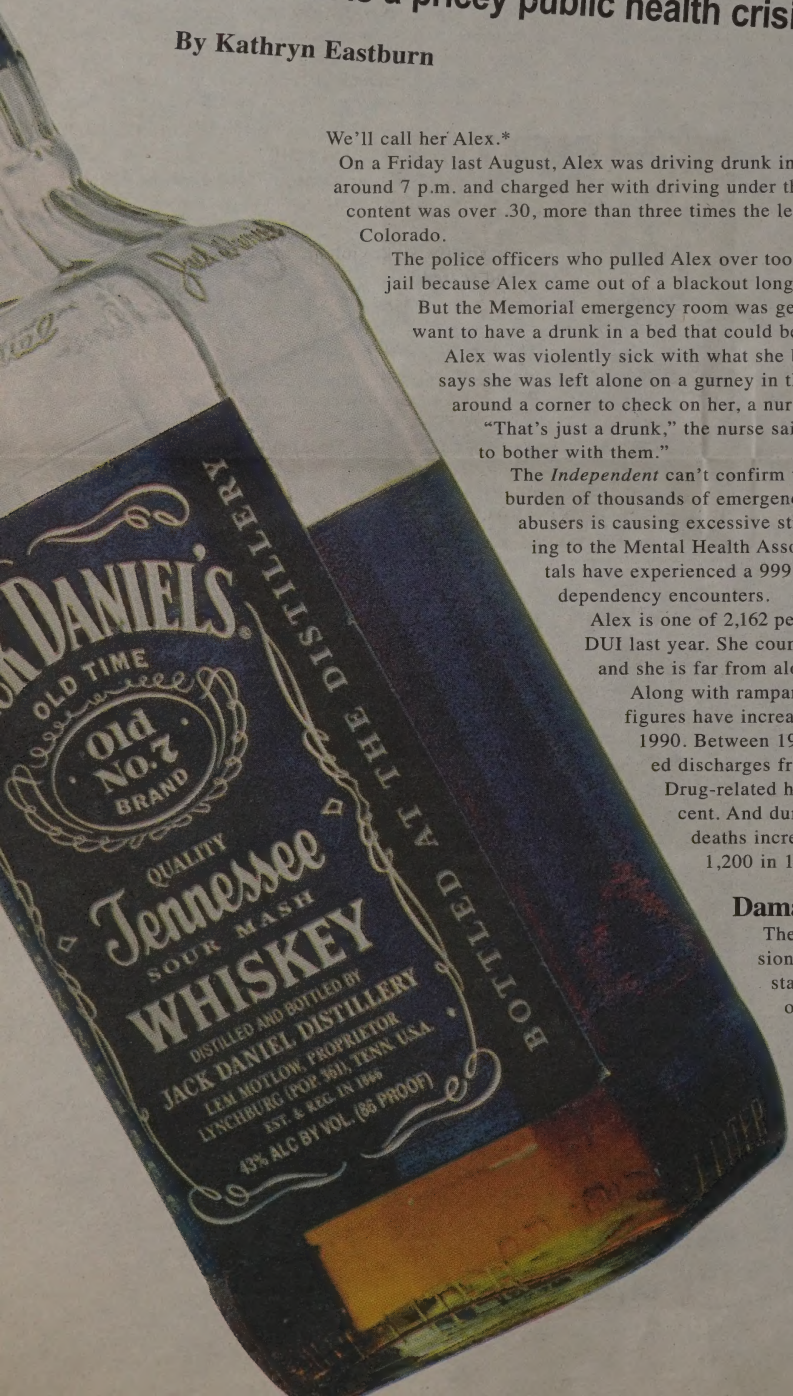
— richt@csindy.com

— Listen to Rich Tosches Thursday mornings on the "Coffey and Alisha Show" on KVUU-FM, 99.9.

SMASHED

Funding for substance abuse treatment has plummeted. The result is a pricey public health crisis.

By Kathryn Eastburn



We'll call her Alex.*

On a Friday last August, Alex was driving drunk in Colorado Springs. Police stopped her around 7 p.m. and charged her with driving under the influence (DUI). Her blood alcohol content was over .30, more than three times the legal level for driving while impaired in Colorado.

The police officers who pulled Alex over took her to Memorial Hospital rather than jail because Alex came out of a blackout long enough to complain of chest pains.

But the Memorial emergency room was getting full, says Alex, "and they didn't want to have a drunk in a bed that could be used for someone else."

Alex was violently sick with what she believed was alcohol poisoning. She says she was left alone on a gurney in the hallway, and when a doctor peeked around a corner to check on her, a nurse quickly ushered the doctor out.

"That's just a drunk," the nurse said, according to Alex. "You don't have to bother with them."

The *Independent* can't confirm that statement but can confirm that the burden of thousands of emergency room visits by chronic substance abusers is causing excessive stress on the system. Since 1999, according to the Mental Health Association of Colorado, Colorado hospitals have experienced a 999 percent increase in drug and alcohol dependency encounters.

Alex is one of 2,162 people in Colorado Springs picked up for DUI last year. She counts herself a chronic substance abuser, and she is far from alone.

Along with rampant population growth, substance abuse figures have increased exponentially in Colorado since 1990. Between 1993 and 1999, Colorado's alcohol-related discharges from hospitals increased by 40 percent. Drug-related hospital discharges increased by 50 percent. And during the same decade, alcohol-related deaths increased, from 997 in 1990 to more than 1,200 in 1998.

Damage control

The state's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division estimates that there are 253,400 substance abusers aged 12 and older in Colorado.

The federal government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's annual survey of drug and alcohol use shows that Coloradans indulge in binge drinking more frequently than folks in 39 other states, with 26 percent of respondents admitting to binge drinking at least once over a one-month time frame.